
Ethnic Relations in Estonia And What They Mean for the World

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Russian-Estonian relations are closely interwoven with complicated problems of state-building, national policy, and internal ethnic relations. These ethnic relations subsist to a large extent on Russia's ambiguous policy toward Estonia. The unfortunate status of a "near-abroad" country, economic restrictions, and political pressure evoke the reflex of national self-defense and the feelings of exclusiveness among Estonians. On the other hand, this tactic keeps alive some of the imperialistic illusions among a part of the local Russians. It also makes those Russians who have decided to align with the Estonian state and Estonian people face an ambiguous situation. In some sense the Estonian-Russians are "hostages." Whether they will be subject to manipulation by the politicians of their ethnic homeland will depend more and more on the ethnic policy of Estonia. Thus, there is great potential for Estonia's internal ethnic issues to become internationalized.

The internationalization of inter-ethnic relations may occur in two ways:

- (1) when the policy of the state towards its ethnic minorities violates the rights of these minorities as declared by international norms or interstate agreements, or
- (2) when inter-ethnic tensions are connected to interstate tensions, or are even caused by the latter.

In the first instance, the international community may respond by applying political pressure to change unacceptable laws or policies, a practice that can have some influence on states that are at least partly democratic. But in cases when the violation of national and human rights of minorities develops into open violence, international political sanctions appear to be powerless as demonstrated by the tragedies of contemporary inter-ethnic wars.

In the second instance, interstate tensions, as a rule, are responsible for ethnic conflicts, and result from larger states' domination over small ones. One should bear in mind that larger states' power was often created or augmented from oppressing weaker neighbors. The privileges obtained in such a way fed myths about the "historical missions of elites" and other

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prejudices. Contemporary politicians then have harnessed these prejudices to the chariot of "national interest." In Russia's political tradition, for example, there is an obsession with protecting its borders, not from inside, but from *outside* the state, leading to Russia's greater interest in the reliability of its neighbors than in its own prosperity. One can find many samples of this vicious tradition in current Russian press and analytical publications. Thus, one influential former Russian ethnic-policy official has stated recently, "Russia should not be afraid of being accused of imperial ambitions, and has to declare openly its priorities in the near-abroad states"¹

In analyzing the case of Estonian-Russian relations and interstate ethnic tensions, in particular, it is necessary to examine the three major conflicts of interests between these two: legal-political disputes, the presence of a Russian "diaspora" within Estonia, and Estonia's efforts to assert its statehood.

The Legal-Political Conflict

The core of the legal-political conflict between Estonia and Russia is the different interpretation of the legal basis for relations between the two states. Estonia dates its creation from the 1920 Tartu Peace Treaty, according to which Soviet Russia recognized the independence of the Republic of Estonia and ceded all territorial claims against Estonia. The Tartu Treaty opened the way for international recognition of Estonia and to membership in the League of Nations. During the 1920s and 1930s, Estonia and the Soviet Union signed a number of subsequent agreements. While not denying the legitimacy of Estonian national independence during 1918-1940, Russia has deemed invalid any treaty between Estonia and the USSR dating from Estonia's incorporation into the former Soviet Union.

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Moreover, Russia and Estonia disagree in their interpretation of Estonia's legal continuity as a state during 1945-1991. Estonia considers its incorporation into the Soviet Union to be a military annexation and occupation during which the Estonian state did not lose its legal continuity. Hence, the end of the occupation should date from August 1991, when Estonia repudiated Soviet authority over Estonia. Russia conveniently regards the Baltic states as entirely new countries that emerged after the disintegration of the USSR. In this fashion, Russia could inherit the rights of the former Soviet Union while renouncing any obligations due from the aggression toward and annexation of the Baltic states or the legal secession of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from the USSR.

Russian-Estonian legal disputes are also found in the conflict over borders and territory. The present-day border between Estonia and Russia

resulted from the Estonian War of Independence (1919-1920). Following the war, some regions near Lake Peipsi and behind the Narva River—inhabited mostly by Russians and Ingerians, yet, having “soft” ethnic transition borders—became part of Estonia. Then in 1944, these regions were linked to neighboring Russian oblasts, separating the Seto ethnographic group near Peipsi from Estonia. Restoring the original border based on the Tartu Treaty is not acceptable to Russia: it might create a precedent for shifting borders elsewhere in the former Soviet Union and it might cause the loss of the Petseri cloister, an important center for the Russian Orthodox Church. Therefore, Russia has not recognized any border other than the Soviet-drawn one of 1944.

This Soviet-era administrative border also is not acceptable to Estonia: it is extremely difficult to control, and it divides the Seto ethno-cultural area. Yet, restoring the 1920 border may threaten Estonia’s ethnic and

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national security interests. The territory is predominantly a Russian settlement to which Estonia lays claim based on historical-legal continuity. Absorbing the area into Estonia, however, would be an ethnic threat, as the share of Russians in Estonia’s population would increase. The value of claiming historical-legal rights to the territory is also problematic. For one, the territory was part of Estonia for only 20 years. More importantly, Estonian politicians take a risk by declaring the October Revolution and its results—including Estonian independence—illegal, as they would legitimize Russian efforts to restore its empire, based on the same principle of historical-legal continuity.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin’s administration has decided to solve the border issue unilaterally. On 21 June 1994, he issued a decree under which the Russian Federation would start demarcating the border with Estonia. The border would follow the one in place as of 24 August 1991, the date when Russia recognized Estonia’s independence. The work is to be completed by the end of 1994.² In this situation, Russia has refused to accept international norms and principles, which require solving such problems through negotiations—not unilaterally. Nor have such actions contributed to friendly relations, particularly as the specific local interests of Estonia in the Seto area were disregarded. On the other hand, if one considers the possibility of empire-minded revanchist groups coming to power in Russia, maybe Yeltsin’s border will protect Estonia better than a disputed one based on the Tartu Peace Treaty.

Finally, there is the dispute arising from the problems connected with the withdrawal of the Russian Army. In the Soviet strategic system, Estonia was one of the most militarized regions, with over 500 bases and installations and numerous military-industrial facilities. The restoration of independence

removed all legal justifications for their continued presence in Estonia, and by mid-1994, the majority of the Soviet military had left. But the process has not been marked by good relations. First, the Russians did not provide information to Estonia on the real size of Russian military units or their characteristics. Second, the withdrawal was carried out without any official agreement between the two countries. Consequently, a number of bases were not properly handed over to the Estonian authorities. Some of the bases were left in terrible condition, and black marketeers and speculators carted off army property, often obtained through civilian sources with connections to the Soviet Army. Third, despite requests by the Estonian government that attack forces in the capital city be removed first, they were withdrawn last, and recruitment of (Russian) volunteers continued during the withdrawal process.

The Russians have gone back and forth on the issue of troop withdrawal. Decisions to stop troop withdrawal were declared several times and under various justifications—violation of minorities' human rights, Estonian laws not corresponding to international norms, lack of prepared bases and housing for military personnel back in Russia, etc. At last, mostly due to international political pressure, the agreement to withdraw was signed by the presidents of both countries on 26 July 1994. Under the agreement, the estimated 2,400 troops will have left Estonia by 31 August, with the exception of the team involved in dismantling the Paldiski reactors.

As a result of the Soviet occupation, numerous retired military personnel reside in Estonia. Among an estimated 10,000 retired army officers, 1,600 are younger than fifty, and over 2,400 are between fifty and sixty.³ These relatively young military professionals became pensioners following their discharge, and can remain in Estonia as civilians. According to an April 1994 survey, conducted by Olga Ossipova of the Institute of International and Social Studies, 18.5 percent of these soldiers retired from the army in 1992 or later.⁴ Together with family members, this group consists of about 40,000 people, which the Estonian authorities had hoped that Russia would take full responsibility for and would help settle back in Russia. Russia, on the contrary, has insisted that Estonia should allow these military retirees to remain unconditionally with all social guarantees, such as pensions. The 26 July agreement partly resolved this issue. Under the agreement, retired military personnel can apply for residency permits under the Aliens Law of 12 July 1993, and the Estonian state would protect their economic and social rights.⁵ Estonia retains the right, however, to deny residency to any applicant who poses a security risk.

The Russian "Diaspora" in the Estonian-Russian Conflict

The Russian (and Russian-speaking) "diaspora" was constituted in its present form as a result of state-initiated and -supported immigration after the incorporation of Estonia into the former Soviet Union. The large size of migration, the high concentration of migrants in the cities, and the sociological differences with the local population led to the formation of a separate community with weak ties to those outside the diaspora. The

majority of non-Estonians were born outside Estonia, and retain strong family and cultural ties to their place of origin. Thus, according to the population census of 1989, only 42.9 percent of the Russians living in Estonia were born there as were 21.1 percent of the Ukrainians. As a whole, 60.5 percent of non-Estonians were born outside Estonia.

The most drastic consequence of Soviet rule is the demographic denationalization of Estonia. The ethnic balance was upset mostly by an extensive migration which began immediately after World War II. On average, 20,000-30,000 immigrants came to Estonia per year. That number began to fall only in the 1980s, and, for the first time, in 1990 the number of emigrants exceeded the number of immigrants. Since mainly young people take part in migration movements, population increases worked to the Estonians' detriment too, as these data about the Estonians' percentage share of the increase in population show:

1960	33
1965	24.4
1970-1974	27.7
1975-1979	3.6
1989-1984	5.1
1985-1989	12.1
1990-1991	30.5

Source: Estonia. *A Statistic Profile, 1992*. Statistical Office of Estonia. 1992. p.35.

The problems of immigrants adapting in Estonia differ from those in the West. Most first-generation immigrants only have had to adapt themselves to social changes and not to the Estonian ethno-cultural system. For example, in Tallinn and northeast Estonia, the main immigration areas, Russian communities and businesses predominate, and therefore, few newcomers have been willing to study the Estonian language. This heavy influx of Russians has de facto expanded Russian ethnic space, moving the Russian-Estonian ethnic border westward, into historically Estonian areas. The data below shows Estonia's ethnic demography, based on the 1989 census:⁶

—The share of Estonians in the population was 61.5 percent in 1989 compared to 88.2 percent in 1934.

—The percentage of Estonians in comparison with the pre-War period has decreased by 3.7 percent.

—The share of Russians was 30.3 percent; their number in comparison with the pre-War period increased five times.

—The share of the other ethnic groups was 8.2 percent.

This ethno-demographic situation leads one to ask whether migration in Estonia (and Latvia) should not be treated as a special case compared to other nations. The situation is exceptional for several reasons. One, the Baltic nations followed in the footsteps of nineteenth-century national liberation movements of Europe in freeing themselves again from the Russian empire. Yet, today the typical European society is first of all a civic society, emphasizing multidimensional identification of individuals and groups. Martin O. Heisler stresses that "ethnic groups in the modern West hardly resemble the functionally and structurally comprehensive, inclusive societal divisions they constitute in other settings. Groups and relations between them reflect social, economic and political forces characteristic of the type of state, [rather] than particular traits indwelling ethnicity."⁷ In addition, the crisis of socialist totalitarianism meant that ethnic "mobilization" became a dominant means of expressing common interests. Western attitudes toward migrants is characterized by an individual-centered approach, not a group- or ethno-centric one (as is the case in the former USSR).

Second, the Estonian Republic sees Soviet rule as an illegal occupation. Accordingly, Estonia never ceased to legally exist. Therefore, it is reasonable to regard Soviet-era immigration as a gross violation of the 1949 Geneva Convention ban on colonization under the presence of military force. If we approach the problem from historical and legal points of view, then we can consider these to be illegal immigrants because they settled as citizens of another state (the USSR) for the purpose of strengthening its incorporation of Estonia.

In reality, migration meant that a Russian-centered part of Soviet society was formed parallel to Estonian society. Official Soviet ideology favored the resettling of people to non-Russian areas using pseudo-internationalist myths about the common Soviet people and their particular historical mission. This myth exempted the newcomers from the moral duty to respect local identities, languages, and lifestyles. The dismantling of the civic society under the Soviet regime broke existing traditional ties between people, and weakened the influence of the values people had followed for ages. The process of "atomization" of society was enhanced by massive deportations. In addition, the state-wide mobilizations on large-scale construction projects of communism involved mass penal servitude. Unfortunately, the convicts were "pioneers" colonizing northeast Estonia.

After the restoration of Estonian statehood this community of "pioneers" found itself in uncertainty as to where it belonged. Again, Soviet-era ethno-demographic policies explain a lot. Immediately after Estonia's annexation in 1940, the Soviet Union designated specific military areas that the native inhabitants had to leave. For half a century much of the Baltic coastline and islands were closed to the civilian population. In addition, half of the settlers have centered in and around the capital and over one-third in the metropolitan area of northeast Estonia. The result is that three-quarters of non-Estonians live in towns where they make up an ethnic majority. This is a fairly compact alien enclave that has pressed Estonian settled areas between

"palisades," forcing their withdrawal from regions bordering with Russia, from the west border, from areas rich in natural resources and important centers of communication.

Employment in Estonia was also affected by this migration policy. This also shows ethnic differentiation, primarily because of the Soviet habit of subordinating to all-Union ministries nearly 90 percent of the industrial economy. Locally, these enterprises became alternative structures to the local society. In Central Asia, this kind of cultural division of labor acquired the form of a hierarchy; in the Baltic states, they had at first a segmental character. Estonia and Latvia were able to stand up against structural expansion for ten to fifteen years, but later the polarization of employment between ethnic groups worsened and now has some hierarchical features. The division of labor became more hierarchical because of the preferential treatment of all-Union enterprises, especially the ones of the military-industrial complex, where Estonians were not employed. The ethno-social and linguistic polarization of society inevitably arose at the political level. At first, the reform movement in Estonia united democratically minded Russians with Estonians, but during the period of restoration of Estonian statehood, the influence of nationalist elements increased both in ideology and in politics. Many Russian democrats withdrew from unified groups and entered a political "no man's land" where they were unable to act as a connecting bridge between two estranged national groups.

The Dilemma of State-Building

For half a century Estonian society has been in a defensive position against Soviet settlers because the latter were an organic part of the Russian-speaking Soviet society and carried out the task of incorporating Estonia into the Soviet Union. Since regaining independence, it has become the duty of the Estonian state to create conditions for a stable society as well as for the union of different subsystems, including ethnic groups. At the same time, the government must guarantee the ethnic security of the Estonian nation, the survival of its language and culture, and the development of human values. The ethnic composition of the population is important for ensuring the ethnic security of the nation, but presumably, it is not sufficient. What is the critical quantitative mass necessary for the survival of a nation, and, maybe, the quality and values of culture?

In Estonia, the principle of its nationhood is formulated on retrospective criteria based on its legal continuity as a state and is grounded on the Estonian ethno-cultural system. Is it possible to combine the idea of a nation-state with the integration of non-citizens and the democratic goals of the state? The key question of any state-building concept in the modern world is how to find ways and forms for inclusion of more groups and individuals into the democratic process, and how to conduct the state on the ground of political participation. Individual freedom of choice to participate in politics is possible only when there are no restrictions against certain groups by virtue of their legal status.

In Estonia today, two communities with a different legal status exist:

citizens and non-citizens. Following the concept of restitution, Estonia has reintroduced, with some amendments, the citizenship law of 1938. All those who were citizens of Estonia on 16 June 1940, as well as their descendants, are recognized as citizens. All other permanent inhabitants of Estonia have to apply for citizenship and may obtain it through naturalization. Despite very liberal naturalization requirements—residing in Estonia for two years beginning on 30 March 1990 and passing a language test—naturalization is proceeding very slowly. Only 41,200 people, some of them ethnic Estonians, have become citizens.⁸ The share of non-citizens among inhabitants of Estonia remains extraordinarily high. The current Estonian citizenship law does not discriminate against anybody on formal ethnic grounds, but its political effect “can be interpreted of course in ethnic terms,” according to the specialist Andrus Park.⁹

The truth is that, especially after the parliamentary elections of September 1992, the Estonian state and political leaders have not taken any major steps to integrate the immigrant society into the state- and democracy-building process. On the contrary, some measures have been introduced to exclude non-citizens from official society in Estonia. Such a tactic expresses itself in the bureaucratic games played around the citizenship issue. The sharpest critique from outside Estonia came

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in regard to the draft Aliens Law and to the July 1993 law that was passed. According to the draft, all non-citizens who were already recognized as permanent residents under the 1990 Migration Law, were obliged to apply for a residency permit. Under international pressure the draft law was changed, but the regulations for its implementation published in April 1994 caused a new storm of indignation, resulting in the postponement of residency permit applications for another year. But a question worth asking is whether the Estonian state is better off with one-third of its population stateless persons and citizens of Russia.

The dramatically changed ethno-demographic situation makes this and other issues highly problematic. Is it, for example, feasible to expand the right of cultural autonomy to minorities without citizenship as a means of consolidating ethnic groups? This option is more acceptable for small groups, but it will not solve the problem of Russians in Estonia. The Russians already dominate several basic branches of the economy and are in the majority in several cities. Russian cultural autonomy will enhance the consolidation of Russians as a distinct society, and in the long term they might demand federal statehood in Estonia. The quest for special status (1990-93) for northeast Estonia and Narva has already arisen among the Russian-speaking population of that region. Under circumstances of weak ties to Estonian society, it may be that the ethno-cultural “pull” toward Russia gains strength and creates conditions for an irredentist movement or even for foreign interference in the case of a “disputed” region.

The conclusion is that cultural self-management, very important in protecting and developing the ethno-cultural identities of minorities, cannot compensate for anyone's exclusion from political participation. The present ethno-political polarization of Estonian society limits the space for democratic developments. The Russian-speaking population in Estonia, as well as the Estonians, have become highly politicized in light of recent events. In addition, Soviet people have always greatly depended on the state (or on the Party apparatus, or on the administration), especially in the Russian political culture of the Soviet time. Being "deprived" of the state is perceived as being deprived of guarantees and defenses, and being rejected from society. One may assume that without the possibility of participation in Estonian public life, ways will be found to carry out inter-community political mobilization that will enhance two alternative political cultures. It is difficult to govern such a society and the state may start to over-administrate. It is also difficult to guarantee the internal security of such a state. One has to hope that the participation of non-citizens in the elections of local authorities, as well as the dialogue at the "round-table" of the president will prepare society for mutual concessions and cooperation.

Conclusion

A world order based on balance of power has not provided the people of the Baltic states with long-term security guarantees. The sovereignty of these small states will remain questionable as long as there exists such an order, or the possibility of a relapse to the previous international power distribution, because of the conflicts of interest between Russia and the Baltic states. And, in case of an international conflict, the presence of a significant Russian population in this region might tip the balance of power. Thus, the foreign-policy efforts of Estonia, like those of the other Baltic states, are directed toward the rapid integration of these countries with the West, and the joining of NATO or whatever future security system in Europe that takes place. Ideas about creating a common Nordic-Baltic defense system are also under consideration. These policies, while prolonging the paradigm of "antagonistic powers," will not soon change. And, as long as the status of Russia in the international security system remains uncertain, the role of the Russian "diaspora" will be difficult because it must choose to either be with "us" or with "them."

To conclude: there does not exist only one solution to the complicated problems in Estonia that would satisfy everyone. It is important that the conflict remain manageable. In order to prevent an escalation of the crisis one needs to create preconditions for rethinking the future of the Estonian state both by the Estonians and the Estonian Russians.

Notes

¹ V. Mikhailov, *Rossiya pered vyborom* (Moscow: Obozrevatel, 1993) p. 23.

² *The Baltic Independent*, 1-7 July 1994. Vol. 5, No. 219.

³ Data of the Russian Embassy in Estonia.

⁴ Two hundred sixty-one retired officers answered questionnaires: 28 percent of them were

aged 50 and under, 30 percent were 51-60 years old, and 42 percent 61 or older. Only 17.6 percent were mobilized from Estonia and only 21 percent were stationed in the Baltic states during their military service.

⁵ Agreement on the social protection of the Russian military pensioners and their family members, residing in Estonia. Daily *Postimees*, 27 July 1994.

⁶ Klara Hallik, Marika Kirch, "On Interethnic Relations in Estonia," In *A Collapsing Empire. Underdevelopment, Ethnic Conflict and Nationalisms in the Soviet Union*, ed. Marko Anttonen, Annali Fondazione and Giagiacommo Feltrinelli, 1992. pp. 150, 152, 155.

⁷ Martin O. Heisler, "Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in the Modern West," in *Conflict and Pacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, ed. J.V. Montville (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1990) p. 5.

⁸ Data of Citizenship and Migration Department of Republic of Estonia, 5 August 1994.

⁹ Andrus Park, "Ethnicity and Independence: The Case of Estonia in Comparative Perspective," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 1994, p. 73.